

“diaspora” in a more positive sense. Looking backward, then, 1973 turns out to be the year when Anglo-American writers’ discursive rape of Americanism coincided with Japanese

writers’ creative reappropriation of Judaism, and ended up accelerating imaginary internationalism and proto-globalism.

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# Ballard

## in the Classroom

Roger Luckhurst

The late great Angela Carter told a wonderful anecdote from her days as a Visiting Professor in an American University. On the day Ronald Reagan swept into the White House in 1980, she gave her depressed students a short explosive text, an essay that purported to measure Reagan’s suitability for the perverse investments of voters, “society’s need to re-conceptualize its political leaders” through increasingly grotesque sexual fantasies. It culminated in an examination of Reagan’s “profound anality.” This was, of course, Ballard’s notorious satire “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan.” Carter reports that “on that November day in 1980 when a British science-fiction writer’s mad notion came true, [the students] laughed until they cried ... and then they demanded: ‘Who is this guy? He is one of your great writers! Why haven’t we heard of him before?’”

I repeat this experiment every year with my students, although for slightly different ends. I use the version of the story reprinted by the San Francisco-based journal *Re/Search*, a version which prints the text on official Republican Party headquarters note-paper and which removes the title and any indication of authorship. Suddenly, the whole nature of the piece is transformed: I watch bemused faces oscillate between laughter and disgust, credulity and incredulity, and listen to heated debates about whether this is an official report, a secret psychological profiling of voter intentions (who will vote for Reagan *because* he is an arsehole), or else a piece of fiction. When I eventually tell them the title and the author there is a dim stirring of recognition: “Isn’t that the guy who wrote the script for some Spielberg film?”

The point of this exercise is precisely to produce a sense of unease, a feeling of uncertainty, an insistence that the unexamined assumptions of

what constitutes the literary are not grounded in any essential element of a piece of prose, but rest in the security of having the edges of the text clearly marked. Take away the title at the top of the page, take away the signature at the bottom of the page, shift the context, and unexpectedly the simple category markers no longer work – students no longer know what they are reading: mimicry of a scientific language can pass off as the real thing.

That it is a Ballard text that produces this effect is also significant, and in some ways this exercise of disadjusting expectations can stand as an allegory for Ballard’s relation to the academy. Ballard has often recorded his opposition to academics in interviews and elsewhere (in 1991 he sent back an invitation to respond to a symposium in the journal *Science-Fiction Studies* by dismissing us as “an over-professionalized academia with nowhere to take its girlfriend for a bottle of wine”), but the academy’s treatment of Ballard has veered between puzzlement or silence or – even worse – merely passing praise. There is a growing awareness of Ballard’s importance to any narrative about post-war British fiction, but equally a sense of unease about what to do with his strange and extraordinary novels and stories. The response of some of my fellow teachers to the fact that I am writing a book on Ballard uncannily echoes that of my students: discomfort.

Why is this? Well, in part, it is inevitably due to framings, to those categorizations that secure contexts in which to read literary texts. And Ballard, it appears, resoundingly belongs to science fiction. Perhaps even 15 years ago this would have been enough to explain the silence regarding his work: any history of English Literature as an institutionalized form of study reveals how Lit-

erature is constituted as a zone of minority “high” culture through the exclusion of majority tastes. Such exclusions intensify with the emergence of mass forms of culture, from the cinema and television to the modern development of genre literature – detective fiction, the spy novel, science fiction all determining their respective generic codes in the early years of this century. Cultural value accrues to that which defines itself in opposition to these popular forms: the “clerisy” of intellectuals (in Coleridge’s term) serves to protect Literature from the influx of impoverished cultural expression.

This kind of answer, however, is no longer enough: students of literature today are taught to problematize such assertions of value, investigating the history and the (often insidious) sociopolitical *uses* of such claims. And in doing that, the field of literature has been transformed by the recognition that popular genre has its own complexity, its own history and codes, its own value. Students in my department now move comfortably from a class on Shakespeare to one on detective fiction or Mills and Boon or the “body horror” films of David Cronenberg.

And science fiction? Science fiction remains tricky – not impossible – but tricky. It is still the case that the study of popular culture must be *legitimated* in some way, that is, as material studied not in itself but as it is seen to work over important cultural issues or anxieties: the romances of Rider Haggard as they help to constitute the boyish excitement and adult melancholy of imperialism; detective fiction as it elaborates modes of epistemological inquiry; Mills and Boon as it constitutes a matrix for the generation of feminine identities. Bits and pieces of science fiction’s history work well here. The cultural critic Susan Sontag was the first to read the 1950s boom in science fiction disaster

All ghosts are enemies. They work for both sides. They work for anyone.”

“The wars are over.”

“Not *this* war.” No; not this undeclared war against children. The Great Fear – the fear of children, their demonization – had too many uses. How long had I slept? I didn’t know, but the encroaching winter, along with my wish to spend as many hours with Dahlia as possible, had meant that I managed to get little rest: two, three hours at most. Guestimating wildly, I prayed that Dahlia was near to projection. We reached the dormitory of the sleeping beauties; entered. “It’s for your own good. We must exorcize her.” The monitors swam with fractals. My stepfather gestured to Baptiste. “Which one is she?” The pimp walked towards a coffin and gave a wake-up call. Dahlia crystallized on the LCD.

“What’s going on?” she said.

“It’s my stepfather. He’s come back.”

“*That* jerk?”

“Khun Dahlia Chan,” said he. “How many times do I have to destroy you?”

“I’m not the same version,” said Dahlia. “I’m the star of *A Princess of Death*, *Kung-Fu Nymphet from Hell*, *The Kingdom of Childhood* –”

“Etcetera – Oh, I know, I know. I sent the simulacrum of your earlier years as a model back to Earth2 some time ago, didn’t I? My, but you started early. How old is this version I’m talking to now?”

“She’s 13,” I said.

“You always did prefer older women. I expect the first thing you did when you were released was start hacking into forbidden sites, eh?”

“Leave him alone,” said Dahlia, “he’s my friend!”

“Couldn’t even choose a white ghost. Had to find yourself a little girl from the South...”

My stepfather was unused to the diurnal rhythms of Antarctica. By the display at the bottom of Dahlia’s LCD I could tell my prayers had been heard; he had overestimated the amount of daylight at his disposal.

“*Leave him alone!*”

The cyclic rhythms programmed into her zillion constituents that protected her from dissolution into the infected, ultraviolet radiation that encoded Earth2 within Earth1 – swung into projection mode. A stream of particles gushed from the coffin, circled the room as if it were a cyclotron as its mortal inhabitants raised their hands across their eyes. The stream cascaded from the ceiling, coalesced in the room’s centre; became a pillar of polychromatic light. My stepfather loosed off both barrels of his handgun; the titanium bullets shattered a wall, exposing iron latticework. And then the pillar assumed the dimensions of a young girl. She wore the PVC catsuit that was part of her wardrobe in *A Chinese Killer Virgin in LA*. A domino hid her partiracial eyes (the pupils so big as to resemble the doll-like gaze of a shark); and across her back hung a curved, Laotian sword.

Biding her time, my ghost helped herself to a little *som tam* that had materialized as she had; waved her hand in front of her mouth in approval of the spiced, unripened papaya’s causticity. She was an Isan girl and liked her food *phet-phet*. But just about every-

thing else about Dahlia had been eclipsed by the two to three years that had encompassed the *Chinese Virgin*’s savage rise to power. Though I had watched the film a hundred-and-one times, what I knew about her amounted to a thumbnail sketch, the trivia of a glacial outerness. Mignonesque, with a pageboy haircut that accentuated a certain fickle, gamine lubricity and at the same time, an older woman’s spleen, she possessed a sexual ambiguity so radical that it evaded all epistemological method, her identity irreducible to a simple *he* or *she*, but a thing-in-itself, unknowable, beyond the experience of the human mind; my ghost, the Chinese Virgin – “Billie Lotus” aka “Billie the Kid” – radiated a controlled, explosive ruthlessness, a sexual omnipotence, Billy who, at eight, had started her career as a beauty queen, but had – through the black widow’s stratagem of copulating and then killing – quickly progressed through the ranks of LA society, buying friends and influence until she had achieved her present status as a queen of the underworld. The dormitory was so dimly lit and Dahlia now so fully projected, so misleadingly human, that I could only identify my spook by her gold-dusted eyes, her gold-lacquered cheeks and fingernails, the heavy gold chains that hung about her neck, the gold bracelets and rings that proclaimed, as did the Bentley with its personalized number plates double-parked outside – she had begged me to buy it – that she had arrived, that she was part of that elite for whom wealth, disregard for the law, sexual exploitation and depravity were the hallmarks of a gilded life; that she was untouchable and that all should fear.

“The beautiful Dahlia Chan,” gurgled my stepfather.

“The *ineffable* Dahlia Chan,” I corrected.

She was more than Billy the Kid; she was the supervillainess Mistress Dragonfly, the child-warrior Cerise Cerise. She was all her mid-career films. She was an aftertrace, a myth without a medium, a representation that had been copied so many times that it had become disassociated from its original.

Where was the original Dahlia? Had she really ever had an original, or had she always been so: a copy of a copy? A mirror within a mirror within a mirror?

My stepfather retreated into the corridor; Baptiste followed.

Dahlia unsheathed her sword; jumped into the air and bounced one, two, three times – off the dormitory’s walls; ran after them, screaming.

I found myself alone amongst a posse of materializing ghosts: vactresses becoming actresses: the blonde, busty teenage vamps of a dozen B-movies that had inspired the children of the Third World to try to snatch what they had never had, the insubstantial glitter that, in the end, neither would nor could give them anything.

We drove out of McMurdo City as the fire from *Les Enfants* spread to adjoining buildings. Behind us, shacks and depots combusted, spasming in terrific violence, spewing corrugated iron, splinters of steel and wood; flames began to lick their way up the pin-nacled heights, lighting the faces of those who